



90. Mt Tichenkang seen from the popular trekking route to Guicha La. The route of ascent follows the left-hand skyline. (*Roger Payne*)



91. Unclimbed sub-6000m peaks in West Sikkim. The Sikkim Government is considering opening more peaks for alpine-style climbing trips. (*Roger Payne*)

JULIE-ANN CLYMA & ROGER PAYNE

Early Season Alpine Summits in West Sikkim

In 2004 we had been very lucky to meet Kunzang Bhutia, the young President of the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association. Bhutia was leading our group of four, made up of Ian and Loreto McNaught-Davis and ourselves, trekking in the Thangsing Valley of West Sikkim. We were interested in attempting some of the peaks, and Bhutia suggested a joint trip the following year. So, in 2005 we returned, and in a 20-day round trip from Gangtok between 15 March and 3 April we made three excursions on peaks in the Thangsing Valley. We were joined by Bhutia's climbing partner Sagar Rai; Bhutia and Rai are both experienced young mountaineers active in providing training for local trek guides and opportunities for school children in Sikkim.

After the usual trek from Yuksum to Thangsing, on 20 March we started a reconnaissance and acclimatisation trip on Mount Tinchengkang (6010m). We followed what we believed to be the original route of ascent, climbed with fixed ropes and camps by an Indo-British military expedition in 1998. Deep fresh snow made progress on the rocky wall below the north-west ridge very slow and precarious. Having reached around 5100m on 21 March, we decided to return to our valley base on the 22nd.

After a rest and delay for bad weather, we then set off on 25 March to make a reconnaissance of the unclimbed Lama Lamani group of peaks. On the 26th we traversed from the north-west side of the group to the south ridge to look for a possible line of ascent. There were very strong winds on the ridges and fresh snow underfoot. On the 27th we moved up to a position under the north-west flank of the mountain, which seemed to offer the best ascent route. Next day we made a pre-dawn start and by 10am had made the first ascent of the north summit of Lama Lamani (c5650m). The climbing on the north-west flank and west ridge was around UIAA grade III+ (or AD+) and mostly on snow with rock steps and a good icy ridge. It was very windy and cold on the ridge, but the views were exceptional. Descent was by the same route and involved some abseiling. We reached our valley base the same evening.

After one day's rest, just the two of us set off for an attempt on Mount Tinchengkang. Because of cloudy conditions it had not been possible to get a good view of the glacier on the north-west side of Tinchengkang. Despite previous glimpses of threatening looking sérac barriers, we decided to try this approach, which we understood had been climbed the previous autumn

by a Himalayan Club group. Strong winds limited progress on the first day and we stopped to camp at c4850m near the start of the glacier slopes. Next day, in cold and windy conditions and very deep snow, we reached the crest of the north-west ridge (junction with the 1998 route) and camped just below it at c5400m. Despite appearances, the glacier route is not threatened by séracs.

Next day, 1 April, we made a pre-dawn start. Once again, there was deep snow and cold conditions, but no wind. Getting onto the bottom of the rock wall was delicate (around UIAA grade IV – but probably easier when clear of snow). The wall had two fixed ropes in place that led towards, then through, a short chimney (some loose rock), then onto the crest formed by the top of the wall. Above this there is an ice wall and couloir (on a previous trip this point had been reached by Bhutia and Rai, but they had to turn back because of lack of good ice climbing equipment). We followed the couloir, which was in good condition, for about 150m, then exited onto the upper snowfields. Straightforward snow slopes led to the final summit pyramid, which was climbed on the west side to avoid a wide bergshrund. The summit was reached just before 2pm. Alas, warm air and clouds blew in from the south-west to obscure the view. On the summit were two snow stakes and the top of a line of rope, which was otherwise buried. We removed one of the snow stakes as a souvenir for our friends back at the valley base.

The weather improved during the descent with excellent views. Some down-climbing and three abseils were needed to descend the rock wall. The previous night's camp was reached by 6pm, but with the walk-out due to start next morning, we continued down to the base at Thangsing, arriving just before 11pm. Bhutia and Rai were waiting.

These two climbs, each made in three-day round trips from a base at Thangsing, demonstrate the potential for alpine-style climbs in West Sikkim.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of Lama Lamini by Kunzang Bhutia, Julie-Ann Clyma, Roger Payne and Sagar Rai; and the first alpine-style ascent of Tinchengkang, Thangsing Valley, West Sikkim.

Acknowledgements: Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne would like to thank the Government of Sikkim and the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association for making this trip possible, and to the Mount Everest Foundation, British Mountaineering Council and UK Sport for their support. Equipment was kindly provided by Lyon Equipment (Beal, Petzl-Charlet), Macpac, Outdoor Designs, Rab and Vaude.